Decision Making and Age

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Decision Making and Age

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Preface

This publication, No. 4 in the series on 'Interdisciplinary Topics in Gerontology', contains papers presented at a NATO sponsored conference on 'Decision Making and Age' held at the University of Thessaloniki, Greece in August 1967. In an important sense this symposium bridges the communications gap between basic and applied science. The previous three volumes in this series have dealt with basic aging phenomena, largely in the behavioral-social sciences, although some aspects of medical care have also been considered. The present volume deals with the application of basic information and techniques in an analysis of processes involved in decision making, and how these change with age.

Decision making is a process involved not only in the day-to-day
behavior of all individuals, but has particular applicability to industry and to problems of retirement. The decision regarding an appropriate retirement age involves not only consideration of physical changes related to aging, but also economic and behavioral-social factors. The latter are dealt with in detail in this symposium.

Herman T. Blumenthal, Ph. D., M.D.
Series Editor

Introduction

The study of changes in capacity and performance that come with age during adulthood is one of the notable advances which have taken place in the behavioural sciences during the last twenty years and is actively pursued in several countries. Most of the research done so far has been concerned with sensory-motor performance, perception and learning of relevance to shop-floor work in industry, or with the assessment of memory, intelligence and other capacities for clinical purposes to differentiate age effects from the results of mental disease or brain injury.

In 1964 the present editors came to realise that the stage had been reached at which studies could be addressed to the very much more difficult task of understanding the nature of age changes for better or worse in higher grade intellectual work and decision-making such as would have relevance to managerial skills in industry and their counterparts in other walks of life. Some beginnings had been made in various countries, and the time seemed opportune for a meeting at which speakers could outline the problems as they saw them and discuss the preliminary work already done. The papers collected here were presented at a meeting held for this purpose at the University of Thessaloniki from 14 to 19 August 1967.

The first paper, by A.T. Welford, aims at setting out the problems by drawing implications for higher intellectual activities from existing knowledge of age-changes in more elementary functions. The second, by J.E. Birren, reports a pilot study aimed at answering the question of how the thinking of an educated man, and the deployment of his faculties, change over the adult life span. The next three papers, by M. Cesa-Bianchi, S. Forssman and F. Climent, discuss interactions of work, working conditions, health and education with
age changes of performance. The sixth paper, by E. and R. M. Belbin, discusses some of the very significant research by the team she directs on the training of people in middle age, and the implications of the results for management activities. 

The remaining five papers deal with studies of more specific topics relevant to the general field of higher cognitive functions. J.P. Guilford discusses these functions in the light of his distinguished work on psychometrics and the assessment of originality; D. B. Bromley explores experiments on classification as an approach to quality and originality of thinking; H.J.A. Rimoldi examines problem solving in terms of relationships between the formal structure of problems and the medium in which they are expressed; F.I.M. Craik outlines actual and possible applications of the theory of signal-detection which has proved a powerful tool in studies of sensory processes, perception and memory and has widespread implications for the definition of human performance; finally W.D. Frhlich describes experiments on social behaviour-which clearly becomes increasingly important as a person reaches the higher ranks of management or command. 

The papers have all attempted not only to look backward at already existing knowledge and ideas, but also to look forward in the attempt to map the way ahead for future research in a field which poses some extremely challenging problems, both practical and theoretical. 

The meeting was sponsored by the Science Committee of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation under its 1967 Advanced Study Institute Programme. We should like to record our gratitude to the Committee for its sponsorship and to the University authorities at Thessaloniki, especially Professor L. Houssidadas, for their welcome and for the arrangements they made.

A.T. Welford
James E. Birren
Symposium Editors